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Remembering and Misremembering Hypatia: the Lessons of Agora

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HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA (ca. 350/370 – 415) cannot speak for herself, but that has not prevented others from speaking for her. Perhaps this is not surprising since the little that is known about her makes one eager to know more and invites speculation. Contemporary with Augustine of Hippo (354-430), she was a mathematician-philosopher who, though she had no sectarian affiliation and was never married, held a position of respect and influence in a city torn by religious strife. With her father Theon, she helped preserve Ptolemy's *Almagest* and she wrote commentaries on Diophantus' number theory and on the *Conics* of Apollonius. Whatever may survive of her writing is incorporated in the mathematical commentaries of later scholars. She went beyond her father and had students to whom she taught the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. One report says that some of her students came from great distances to study with her; another source says that she gave public lectures on philosophy. Her style of teaching and the content of her lectures are almost completely lost from memory. The only words attributed to her in the ancient sources reveal a resourceful mind and a forceful personality. She deflected the amorous advances of a student by thrusting a used sanitary napkin at him, saying, "This is the focus of your learning, young man, but it is nothing beautiful." All of these facts make her interesting, but the savage violence of her death at the hands of thugs loyal to Cyril, bishop of Alexandria (ca. 376-444), makes her an object of sympathy as well as of curiosity. Her murder may be the greatest single factor that has kept her story alive.

The *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates Scholasticus, published in 440, gives the most reliable overview of Hypatia's life and death, notwithstanding that she is mentioned in the *Suda*, a tenth century Byzantine encyclopedia which preserves the sixth century pagan accounts of Damacius and Hesychius of Milesius. The most informative source contemporary with her is the writings of her student Synesius. Six epistles (cited as Ep), and part of a seventh that he wrote to her are extant, written between 394 and 413. Several letters to other correspondents also allude to her. Synesius sent three of his writings to Hypatia—*Dion*, *On Dreams*, and *On the Gift of an Astrolabe*. One can mine these works for clues about what he learned from her. His lighthearted *In Praise of Baldness*—he was bald—is also useful in this regard. Synesius was probably born around 370 and studied with Hypatia in the 390s. He became Cyrene's bishop in 409 or 410. He died in 413, two years before the death of the one he called "mother, sister, teacher" (Ep 16).

The books of Maria Dzielska (1995) and Michael A. B. Deakin (2007) are the most reliable recent treatments of Hypatia. Deakin's book discusses Hypatia's place in the history of mathematics and is especially useful because it includes an appendix with translations of the most ancient sources that make explicit mention of her. Dzielska documents that Hypatia's story has inspired artists, playwrights, poets, and novelists. Like other striking figures, however, Hypatia has been as influential when misunderstood as when understood. For example, Elbert Hubbard's fanciful account of Hypatia, published in 1908 in the *Little Journeys* series, makes her out to be a "free thinker." Quotations from Hubbard's booklet are widely cited on the internet as the authentic words of Hypatia (cf. Donovan, pp. 43, 48). In the words of Bryan Whitfield, "Hypatia has suffered a fate worse than neglect; she has become a symbol" (14).

Agora (2009), the work of Alejandro Amenábar and Mateo Gil, provides the first film incarnation of Hypatia, starring Rachel Weisz in the lead role. It is historical fiction

and, as such, one should not expect from it the accuracy of a documentary. Nevertheless, one may ask if it is *good* historical fiction. On the negative side, I take this question to mean, taking into account the dramatic license of film making and story-telling, do its fictional aspects detract from what is known from history? Does it perpetuate misconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices? Is its subject too much a symbol and not enough an actual person? On the positive side, does the fiction allow us to see, from different perspectives and in more illuminating ways, the characters and events on which it is based? With certain reservations, I believe that *Agora* succeeds as historical fiction. First, however, let us ask what is known of Hypatia from the historical sources.

Hypatia's Story in History

Hypatia's father was Theon, astronomer and mathematician and the last to head the Museum at Alexandria. He was not associated with the Alexandrian library which, contrary to Edward Gibbon (ch. 28: 462), had been destroyed more than four centuries before Theon lived (Pollard and Reid, 264 and 280-287). Theon was pivotal in transmitting the works of Euclid (3rd century BCE) and Ptolemy (2nd century CE) to later scholars. An inscription in Book III of his commentary on Ptolemy's *Almagest* mentions that it was "prepared by my daughter Hypatia." Scholars guess that Hypatia's contribution to this work was a more systematic method of long division. Hesychius says that Hypatia wrote commentaries on Diophantus' number theory and on the *Conics* of Apollonius (Deakin, 95-101; Waithe, 178-180). Two of Synesius' letters indicate other aspects of Hypatia's scientific interests. He sent an astrolabe (a two dimensional representation of the celestial sphere) to the general Paeonius accompanied by a letter—also sent to Hypatia—that says it was of "his own devising, including all that she, my most reverend teacher, helped to contribute . . ." (Ep 154). In another letter he requests that she see to the construction of a brass hydroscope, an instrument for measuring the specific

density of a liquid (Ep 15). Synesius needed the instrument because he was ill. Dzielska speculates that he desired the hydroscope for purposes of divination (78). Deakin suggests, more plausibly, that it was used to measure urine in order to calculate the required dose of a diuretic (104-105).

There is no record of Hypatia having written any strictly philosophical work, although Damacius reports that she "assumed the scholar's mantle" and gave public lectures on Plato and Aristotle or any other philosopher. Synesius says in a letter to his brother that he visited Athens and became convinced that philosophy, once alive in that city, had become an empty skin, but that philosophy flourishes in Egypt thanks to Hypatia's "fruitful wisdom" (Ep 136). Since Synesius learned from her, we may guess from his letters what she taught. Hypatia's classes must have included a heavy dose of Platonic philosophy, for Synesius mentions or alludes to fourteen of Plato's works— *Gorgias*, *Lysis*, *Menexenus*, *Meno*, *Parmenides*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, *Protagoras*, *Republic*, *Sophist*, *Symposium*, *Theatetus*, and *Timaeus*. He calls Plato "the master" (*On Dreams*, sec. 5) and mentions him eleven times in his letters. He shows a detailed knowledge of the varied ways that Plato has Socrates make use of rhetoric (*Dion*, sec. 13). His knowledge of Plato's theology, from *Timaeus*, and of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmology, is evident in his tongue-in-cheek *In Praise of Baldness* (sec. 8 and sec. 10).

Synesius shows familiarity with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, *Nichomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and *On Animals*. He is comfortable using Aristotle's metaphysical analysis of substance as composed of form and matter (*On Dreams*, sec. 10). His works mention several other well-known literary figures and philosophers of antiquity, including Aspasia, Chrysippus, Heraclitus, Hesiod, Homer, Parmenides, Pindar, Pythagoras, Sappho, Zeno of Citium, and Zeno of Elea. Synesius occasionally draws on what seems to be a modest sophistication in music for metaphors and analogies (*On Dreams*, sec. 2; *Dion*, sec. 16), so it is possible that music

theory was included in Hypatia's classes. Taking a clue from Socrates the historian who says that Hypatia continued the school of Plato and Plotinus it is often assumed that her philosophy must have been neo-Platonist in the tradition of Plotinus (204/5-270), following either Porphyry (234-c. 305) or Iamblichus (c. 245-325). This is possible, for some of Synesius' idioms echo those of Plotinus; however, explicit mention of Plotinus is notable by its scarcity. He quotes Plotinus' *Enneads* (*Dion*, sec. 8) and in a letter to his friend Herculian he alludes to Plotinus' last words (Ep 139).

Synesius' longest letter to Hypatia (Ep 154), composed around 404, was accompanied by three of his writings, one of which was his book on divination through dream interpretation. He told Hypatia that "God ordained [it] and He gave His sanction to it." He says that the book was completed in one night's work of ecstatic inspiration. In the book he says that he felt like he was listening to himself as though he was another person. Synesius' theory is that *pneuma* (literally, "breath") is the imaginative faculty of the soul, "the first body of the soul" (an idiom of Plotinus for saying that it is the closest to deity). *Pneuma*, which is shared even by animals, is "a powerful reflecting mirror of all the images" coming to us from the past, present, and future (*On Dreams*, sec. 10). Those who are most virtuous can read the signs of their dreams and be correctly guided through life. He advocates keeping "night books" in which to record dreams, the better to discern their significance. Oneiromancy, he says, is available to everyone, regardless of one's station in life. "Of divination by dreams, each one of us is perforce his own instrument, so much so that it is not possible to desert our oracle there even if we so desired" (*On Dreams*, sec. 8). We do not know what Hypatia thought of her student's theories about dream interpretation.

The other book that he sent to her, *Dion*, provides hints about Hypatia's pedagogy. Synesius prides himself on the freedom with which he philosophizes. He is not beholden to a schedule with appointed times and places for lecturing.

He writes,

> I knew that I should cut off a great part of my freedom if I had to make a minute study of a book beforehand, a practice by which it comes to pass that the faculty of memory is energetic, but the critical faculty untrained and sterile, that faculty which must needs be the judge of books. It is through this above all that the philosopher exists; let the other be presented to the grammarian (*Dion*, sec. 11).

He explains that these "grammarians . . . never succeed in bringing to birth anything of their own" (*Dion*, sec. 12). Expressing his disgust at the method and the contents of the grammarian's teaching, he says, "a man cannot cherish the word within him, who must perforce vomit it out every day" (*Dion*, sec. 12). Synesius was asking for Hypatia's endorsement of his book, so we may suppose that her teaching methods did not resemble those of the grammarians. Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* describes an alternate pedagogy. In Plotinus' classes, philosophical treatises would be read aloud, followed by a critical commentary by the master. According to Porphyry, Plotinus did not have the "inflated pomp of the professor and his lectures had the air of conversations." We cannot know if Hypatia's classrooms were similar to this, but given the value that Synesius puts on originality and freedom of thought, it is not an unreasonable assumption.

Synesius tirelessly advocated philosophy as central to the education of the noble born. Reflecting the Aristotelian division, he says in a letter to Pylaemenes written in 402, "There are two parts in philosophy, contemplation and action. Wisdom presides over the one, and prudence over the other" (Ep 103). He defends philosophy not on the grounds that it makes one prosperous but on the Socratic grounds that it keeps one's attention on truth and virtue. Philosophy requires a devotion to reason, the quality through which we are best able to imitate the deity (cf. Ep 31). Synesius uses the expression, "the mysteries of philosophy" (Ep 143, Ep 151), which suggests that he may have been initiated into the Orphic mysteries. If true, this means merely that he had read the ancient poems and songs. In *Dion*, Synesius argues for

classical learning, counting it the superiority of the Greeks over other cultures. Those who have been "initiated" into the "mysteries of philosophy" have, as Aristotle suggests, not simply learned a lesson but have undergone an experience (*Dion*, sec. 7). Synesius prides himself on the high priority he gave to adding to the library of books he inherited and that he would in turn pass on to his son (*Dion*, sec. 13). Of course, only an aristocrat could afford books or teach his children how to read them.

Synesius makes analogical use of Euclid's first principle to express equality among his friends—"Things which are equal to the same thing are also equal to one another" (Ep 93; Ep 131). The equality, however, is among the elite, for the activity of philosophy implies for Synesius, as it did for Aristotle, a stratified society. Synesius uses the market-place, the *agora*, as a symbol of that which distracts from philosophy. In a letter to Pylaemenes he warns against worldly concerns, "I fear [for your sake] the intercourse of the market-place, the absorption in many situations and affairs; and that these may soil that most holy temple, your divine intellect, one of the few I deem entirely worthy to receive God" (Ep 151). In a letter to his brother, he invokes Plato's allegory of the cave and explains that "the vulgar crowd" (Ep 105) are like those with poor eyesight. An excess of light injures their eyes, so they must live in the shadows. In analogous fashion, the light of philosophy would destroy their simplistic beliefs and so it is useful to allow them their falsehoods. This applies not only to the traditional myths, which he viewed as allegories for philosophic wisdom, as Plato did (cf. *In Praise of Baldness*, sec. 20), but also to a Christian doctrine like the resurrection of the body. The report that Hypatia gave public lectures suggests that she was not as elitist as Synesius. In this, she would have been more consistent with Socrates who immersed himself in the *agora*, encouraging his fellow citizens to attend to virtue, although it cost him his life. Hypatia too lost her life to the mob, although there were other factors besides suspicions

about philosophy, if indeed philosophy was a factor at all.

Nothing connects Hypatia to the Serapeum, the center of Greek cultic religion. Nor is there evidence of animosity between Hypatia and Theophilus, Alexandria's bishop until 412. Theophilus presided at Synesius' wedding and converted him to Christianity. Synesius wrote to his brother concerning whether he was fit for the office of bishop, a letter he knew Theophilus would read. He mentions his life as a country gentleman and of his desire to attend to the matters of his wife and children. He explains his elitism, expressing his doubts about reconciling popular Christian beliefs, which he associates with "the ordinary man," and the teachings of philosophy (Ep 105). He says that "Truth is an attribute of God, and I wish in all things to be blameless before Him." Theophilus could not have been ignorant that Hypatia had shaped Synesius' views; yet, he appointed Synesius as bishop of Cyrene. Synesius may have realized, as Deakin avers, that the future of his beloved Greek learning rested with Christianity. By 410 he had reconciled himself to his new office with the words, "I pray [God], that this office may not seem to me a descent from the realm of philosophy, but rather a step upwards to it" (Ep 96).

Deakin speculates that Synesius' relation to Theophilus protected Hypatia. She was murdered in 415, two years after Synesius died and three years after Cyril replaced Theophilus. Another factor in Hypatia's neutrality is that her students, all male, included Christians and non-Christians (Dzielska, 28-40). This was, after all, the period when Christianity and classical learning began the sometimes uneasy marriage that has been called the medieval synthesis, a convergence of ideas to which Hypatia was contributing, even if that was not her intention. Christians across the empire had already, for over a century, been debating the nature of Christ using Greek philosophical categories. Finally, it must be noted that long before Cyril's rise to power, Hypatia had acquired a position of respect in Alexandria. Socrates says that she was so highly respected for her virtue and dignity of

deportment that she was not excluded from the assemblies of men and of magistrates. Damacius adds that newly elected archons called upon her perhaps for her blessing or for her political advice. Damacius also says that she was honest and remained a virgin throughout her life. Despite these advantages, Hypatia was not to survive the power struggle between Alexandria's new bishop and its prefect.

Political and religious tensions ran high. In 391, Theophilus, with help from an imperial decree, put an end to the Greek religious cult and toppled the Serapeum. His successor, Cyril, was no less zealous, but he found himself in a struggle with other Christians, with the Jews, and with the prefect, Orestes, who was himself a Christian. After hounding Novatian Christians from the city, Cyril turned his attention to the Jews. During a dancing exhibition on the Sabbath attended by Jews, Orestes published an edict regulating such activities. Hierax, a supporter of Cyril, was in the crowd. The Jews brought this to Orestes' attention. He inferred that Cyril was spying on his activities, so he had Hierax tortured in the theater. Incensed, Cyril threatened the Jewish leaders with punishment if they did not desist from molesting Christians. In response, the Jews hatched a plot that was finally their undoing. Under cover of night they raised an outcry that the church named for Alexander was on fire. As Christians emerged from their dwellings, Jews slaughtered them. At daybreak it became clear that the perpetrators were Jews, so Cyril called his forces together and drove the Jews out of the city and plundered their belongings.

Orestes viewed Cyril's actions as a challenge to his authority, not to mention that banishing a sizable portion of the city was bad for commerce. Orestes and Cyril appealed to the Emperor but we do not know his response. We do know that Orestes rebuffed Cyril's offer of reconciliation. As a last resort, Cyril "extended towards him the book of the gospels," but this too was of no avail (Deakin, 145). Word of Orestes' recalcitrance reached the monks in the Nitrian mountains where Cyril had studied. About five hundred of

them entered the city, accosted Orestes, and accused him of being a "pagan idolater." Orestes protested that he was a Christian, baptized by Atticus, the bishop of Constantinople. A monk named Ammonius threw a stone at Orestes, striking him on the head and drawing blood. Ammonius was arrested and Orestes had him tortured so severely that he died. Again, Orestes and Cyril appealed to the Emperor and again we do not know his response. Cyril eulogized Ammonius, renamed him "Thaumasius" (the wonderful), and declared him a martyr. Socrates notes that this did not even convince Cyril's supporters for Ammonius had not died because he would not deny Christ.

The charge that Orestes was a pagan was fueled by the rumor that his friendship with Hypatia prevented his reconciliation with Cyril. The one ancient source hostile to Hypatia, the seventh century *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu, repeats this rumor and places the blame on Hypatia not only for corrupting Orestes but also for leading other Christians astray. During Lent, in March 415, some of Cyril's followers, led by a lector named Peter, ambushed Hypatia as she rode in her carriage. Orestes escaped such an attack with a head wound, but Hypatia was less fortunate. The mob drug her to the church named *Caesareum* where they stripped her and flayed her. The crowd tore her body to pieces, took it to a place called Cinaron, and burned the remains. There is not much doubt that those who had assaulted Orestes also killed Hypatia. Cyril enlisted the Nitrian monks in the corps of parabolani; "parabolan" means "one who exposes himself to danger." One task of the parabolani was humanitarian, to take care of the sick and dying, but they also served as a militia in the patriarch's service. The parabolani are the most logical candidate for the mob that attacked Hypatia (Deakin, 73-76; Dzielska, 95-97). No more is heard of Orestes or of Hypatia. Nor is there any evidence that anyone was held accountable for her murder (Deakin, 204 and 206).

Whenever Hypatia's murder is discussed, the question is raised of Cyril's complicity. Socrates' comment on the odious

butchery of a gifted teacher is a study in understatement:

> The affair brought not the least opprobrium, not only on Cyril, but also on the whole Alexandrian church. And surely nothing can be further from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort (Deakin, 147).

John of Nikiu saw nothing unchristian in Hypatia's murder. He is happy to report that Cyril was proclaimed "the new Theophilus" because "he had destroyed the last remains of idolatry in the city" (Deakin, 149). The disagreement between Socrates and John of Nikiu is a disagreement between professed Christians. The only source to blame Cyril directly is the pagan Damacius, but his account assumes what is unlikely, that after three years in the city Cyril remained ignorant of Hypatia's residence (Deakin, 142). Evidence that indirectly implicates Cyril is that the Alexandrian city council, in 416, successfully petitioned Constantinople to have the parabolani reorganized. Their numbers were reduced; they were to be appointed by the prefect rather than the patriarch; and they were prohibited from appearing in public places, councils, or tribunals (Dzielska, 95-96). Wresting control of the parabolani from Cyril suggests that they were indeed under his direction. Whether Cyril ordered her murder cannot be established.

Hypatia's story in *Agora*

Agora depicts the major events in Hypatia's story from the fall of the Serapeum in 391 until her death in 415. All of the characters who play important roles in her story are included. Amenábar and Gil take liberties in portraying events and characters that are by turns artistically astute and problematic. Orestes is made Hypatia's student and he is identified as the rebuffed suitor. She is portrayed as only a little older than her students. This makes it easier to accommodate the napkin incident but harder to explain the esteem, usually reserved for an elder, in which Hypatia was held by the historical Synesius. Nevertheless, Amenábar

and Gil skillfully make the napkin incident compatible with Hypatia's reputation for dignified deportment. She does not hurl the napkin at Orestes; she hands it to him. It was a missed opportunity not to connect this incident more clearly with her philosophy. Hypatia's chastity must have been an extension of her Platonism which found the greatest beauty in the nonphysical realm of Ideas. It is this which explains her devotion to a life of reason and virtue. In the words of Synesius, written to another student of Hypatia, "To live according to reason is the end of man" (Ep 137).

The figure to whom *Agora* is least fair is Synesius. He is shown as Hypatia's student, calls her "mother, sister, teacher" (Ep 16), and he becomes bishop of Cyrene, otherwise nothing of the real Synesius remains. Amenábar and Gil give him a full head of hair, portray him as a Christian when studying with Hypatia, and show him as alive at the time of her death. These are minor inaccuracies but his personality is distorted beyond recognition. He takes Cyril's side to convince Orestes that he, Orestes, too readily accepts Hypatia's authority. He is shown, plausibly enough, learning the analogical use of Euclid's first principle from Hypatia; but he makes fallacious use of it to convince her that she is already a Christian and should submit, as a mere formality, to being baptized. When she refuses he is disgusted with her. The dogmatism and sophistry of *Agora's* Synesius are unworthy of the actual man. To the end of his days he revered Hypatia and held fast to the devotion to philosophy that she taught him. He resisted becoming a bishop in large measure because he considered the teachings of philosophy to be in tension with Christian ideas, at least as these were understood by most Christians. He accepted the preexistence of the soul and he rejected the doctrine of the resurrection of the body (Ep 105). His Christianity, like Origen of Alexandria's two centuries before, was highly Hellenized.

One cannot help but regret that the real Synesius never makes an appearance in the film, if only because it would have tempered the tendency to pit Christianity against Greek

learning. Arguably, this is *Agora's* most egregious departure from history. The Serapeum is erroneously shown as including the second or "daughter library" for which Alexandria was famous. Building fiction on fiction, Hypatia is shown as associated with this library and thus with the Serapeum. In the scene in which Christians storm the building, Hypatia and her students salvage a few scrolls from a mob eager to destroy what one voice in the pell-mell calls "pagan filth." There can be no question that Christians have sometimes been antagonistic to higher learning. On the other hand, Christians in scriptoria and monasteries helped preserve many of the Greek classics and transmit them to later ages. Christian philosophers, beginning with Augustine, helped keep Greek learning alive. A. N. Whitehead famously argued that the rationalism of medieval theology, incorporating Greek philosophic ideas, paved the way for modern science (ch. 1). To their credit, Amenábar and Gil show Christians as among Hypatia's students, although this message tends to be eclipsed by the scenes in which Christians are portrayed as hostile to education.

A more illuminating departure from history is the fictional character of Davus, a slave in Theon's house. Seeing Alexandria's problems and Hypatia through his eyes gives perspective on a variety of issues and adds elements of dramatic tension. He loves Hypatia but is separated from her by social station. The cruelty of his position is palpable. Hypatia congratulates him in front of her class on his moving model of the Ptolemaic system; seconds later, however, she prevents a scuffle between Orestes and Synesius and tells the students, "Brawls are for slaves and for riffraff." She is oblivious to the insult she has just handed Davus. The insult is the more ironic in light of the fact that she has just used the analogy from Euclid's first principle to express the "equality" of her students. Davus is equal in intellectual ability but not in social standing. Davus eventually finds equality among the parabolani, but they make no use of his intellectual gifts. He listens to the inane ideas of a fellow parabolan on the shape

of the earth, a theory he knows to be false because of his exposure to Hypatia. He is caught between two worlds.

Agora greatly exaggerates Hypatia's scientific accomplishments, for she anticipates twelve hundred years of progress in astronomy and physics. The fiction, however, is surprisingly plausible. She initially teaches that the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic theory that sublunar objects fall because they seek the center of a motionless earth; stars do not fall because they move in perfect circles in the heavens. The retrograde motion of "the wanderers" (planets) is explained by Ptolemy's epicycles. Orestes asks why God did not simply place the planets in circular orbits. In subsequent scenes, Aristarchus' sun-centered model is discussed as a way of explaining retrograde motion. This is deemed absurd because objects would fly off a moving earth. Later, Hypatia, anticipating Galileo, has a servant drop a weight from the top of the mast of a moving ship. The weight lands at the foot of the mast, showing that it shares the ship's motion. She realizes that the objects on earth might share its motion. Using her knowledge of conic sections she guesses that the earth's orbit is an ellipse; she deftly uses a sand box, two fixed poles, a rope, and a moveable stick to illustrate what Kepler discovered in the seventeenth century—the sum of the distances of the earth from the two foci of its orbit around the sun remains constant.

One of the ancient objections to Aristarchus is not mentioned, namely the lack of a parallax in the fixed stars. Hypatia would have known this objection from reading Aristotle. On the other hand, if one is willing to imagine her breaking free of Greek ideas about a circle's perfection, why not allow her to question the importance of the parallax? She could have argued that the failure to observe a parallax presupposes knowledge that none of the ancients had, namely, that the stars are close enough to make such an observation. The fact is that a parallax was not measured until the nineteenth century. The more telling objection to exaggerating Hypatia's scientific advances is that it is too

easily construed as part of the narrative that science and religion are fundamentally antagonistic to each other. In a word, Hypatia's murder by religious fanatics puts an end to scientific inquiry in Alexandria. The flirtation with this misconception is also evident in making Hypatia more of a metaphysical skeptic than she probably was. In one scene, a magistrate asks why the assembly should take advice from someone who believes in absolutely nothing. Hypatia responds, "I believe in philosophy." The magistrate scoffs, "Philosophy, just what we need in times like these." The scene fails to indicate that Hypatia's philosophy was not skepticism; it had *content* drawing heavily upon the views of Plato and Aristotle. The same partial view of Hypatia's Platonism is evident in a later scene when she contrasts (the fictional) Synesius' unquestioning faith with her inability not to question. Doubtless the historical Hypatia questioned her beliefs, but she also drew conclusions.

Amenábar and Gil never quite portray Hypatia as a martyr for reason and science whose death ushers in an age of ignorance and superstition. That conceit is mercifully left on the altars raised by "free thinkers" and the new atheists. *Agora* dovetails with history in showing Hypatia as the victim of the tug-of-war between Alexandria's prefect and patriarch. The film goes beyond history by showing Cyril inflame passions against Hypatia by quoting I Timothy 2:12, that no woman is "to teach or to have authority over a man." This may rely too much on the version of Cyril found in John of Nikiu who demonizes Hypatia. On the other hand, it would be surprising if the historical Cyril never thought of the passage in I Timothy as a Scriptural weapon against Orestes. Nevertheless, *Agora* clearly portrays the plot to murder Hypatia as the brain-child of the parabolani and not as a directive from Cyril. It should also be noted that Ammonius and the parabolani are shown in all of their complexity, as humanitarians feeding the hungry and caring for the sick but also as capable of unspeakable violence in what they considered the defense of their faith. Also of interest is that,

consistent with the testimony of the historical Synesius, Christian monks don the "coarse dark mantle" while pagans wear white (Ep 147; Ep 154).

The requirements of drama, and perhaps of good taste, triumph over history in the depiction of her death. Knowing of the plot to kill Hypatia, Davus tries to warn her but he is too late. The parabolani are leading her to the church. They strip her and threaten to flay her. Davus tells them not to dirty their swords with impure blood. As the others collect rocks to stone her, Davus embraces her from behind. The two nod at each other in a terrifying agreement at what Davus must do. As memories of happier times flood his mind, he smothers her. The frenzied parabolani, thinking she fainted, stone her corpse. Since the manner of her death is the most well-known fact about her, one may thank Amenábar and Gil for not sensationalizing the story. Their depiction of her death allows the expression of tragic irony: Davus shows mercy to Hypatia by killing her, a woman he loved and admired. Earlier he told Ammonius that he had been forgiven but could not forgive. He was referring to his near rape of Hypatia after the fall of the Serapeum. Before he can carry out the deed, he comes to his senses. In remorse he falls to his knees and places the point of his sword on his neck, inviting her to kill him. Instead, she releases him from slavery and tells him to go. In mercy, she spared his life; in mercy, he took hers.

Conclusion

The larger message of *Agora* is missed if one stresses too much its inaccuracies or admires too much its artistry. As I have noted, Synesius viewed the market-place, the *agora*, as symbolic of the forces that threaten philosophy. Philosophy is the safeguard against cheap substitutes for a life of reason directed by respect for virtue and truth. Synesius argued that wisdom without the effort and discipline of education is given, at most, to a gifted few. Those who seek a short-cut to truth want conclusions without premises, knowledge without

the rigors of thinking, or in Synesius' words, "a passing beyond reason without the previous exercise of reasoning" (*Dion*, sec. 7). He says, "Truth is not a commodity lying on the ground, or deposited by the wayside, or a quarry to be captured in a hunt." Synesius understood that these views on Greek learning are compatible with living a Christian life. But neither he nor his teacher would have conceded that having faith in Christ is a substitute for pursuing a life of reason. The word translated "belief" or "faith" in the New Testament is *pistis*. This is the very word that in Plato's *Republic* is translated as "opinion," which never reaches to the level of knowledge, that is to say, of discursive reason (*dianoia*) or reason that sees the whole in relation to the parts (*noesis*). As Hypatia must have seen, neither a personal conviction of the dogmas of one's faith nor the assurances from Church authorities of their orthodoxy could be a substitute for the ascent to truth through a disciplined use of the mind. In the words of Synesius, this would be too much like "the attainment of a goal without running the race" (*Dion*, sec. 7).

The lesson of *Agora* is the danger that dogmatism, blind faith, or mere opinion, poses to civilized life. The most ironic statement in the film is the one uttered by the statesman in response to Hypatia's profession of belief in philosophy. The man rebukes her with a scoff, "Philosophy, just what we need in times like these." There was not, however, much philosophy—nor as the Christian Socrates saw, much *caritas*—in the mob that lynched Hypatia. Theirs was a zeal born of unquestioned faith in the rightness of their cause. That is an indictment of Christianity only to the extent that Christians and their leaders place faith beyond the jurisdiction of reasoned inquiry. Very clearly, this is not a danger unique to Christianity, for one finds it in every religion that has had time to grow from its infancy and gain a measure of political influence. More interesting still, the twentieth century saw new forms of it from virulently anti-religious political regimes. *Agora* is a showcase of Christians in the grip of such fanaticism. Insofar as one infers that this is the

condition of most Christians one is breathtakingly mistaken. The message, however, is that faith, free of the doubt that reason implies, is the weapon of choice of tyrants and mobs. Brute force fills the vacuum left by reason's absence. *Agora*, seriously considered, might lead us to assert, without any hint of sarcasm, "Philosophy, just what we need in times like these."

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